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Thackeray's *The Rose and The Ring*: A Novelist's Fairy Tale

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Abstract

Discusses Thackeray’s literary fairy tale—its technique, moral, and the similarity of its techniques to those used in his novels.

Additional Keywords

Thackeray, William Makepeace. The Rose and the Ring

Thackeray's The Rose and The Ring

A Novelist's Fairy Tale

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Having published only one fairy tale, William Makepeace Thackeray is undoubtedly better known as a Victorian novelist and perhaps best known as the author of *Vanity Fair* (1848). *The Rose and The Ring* was not a calculated attempt on Thackeray's part to expand into the realm of fantasy literature; his "History of Prince Giglio and Prince Bulbo" grew out of a set of Twelfth Night characters Thackeray drew for his daughters while living in Rome. The discarded figures of the King, the Queen, the Lady, the Lover, the Dandy, and the Captain led him to concoct an elaborate tale along the lines of a holiday pantomime.[1] *The Rose and The Ring* was published as a Christmas book in 1854 with 58 illustrations by the author.[2] It was an immediate success with "children great and small" and became "one of the best loved literary fairy tales of the last century" (Stevens, 5).

"Literary" is a key word, for in many ways *The Rose and The Ring* is decidedly not a traditional fairy tale and is quite obviously the handiwork of Thackeray the novelist. There are, for example, the allusions to Shakespeare and the satiric references to contemporary authors of whom Thackeray was not fond.[3]

> "Had I the pen of G.P.R. James," [the narrator sighs, referring to a popular author of historic romances,] "I would describe Valoroso's torments in the choicest language; in which I would also depict his flashing eye, his distended nostril – his dressing gown, his pocket-handkerchief, and boots. But I need not say I have *not* the pen of that novelist; suffice it to say Valoroso was not alone (TR&TR, 3).

There are also elements of the burlesque, as when King Valoroso shifts from scolding his daughter in accents most domestic to soliloquizing in blank verse. (But oh! . . .ere I was a king, I needed not this intoxicating draught, once I detested the hot brandy wine, and quaffed no other fount but nature's rill" [3] – this as he sips cognac from his eggcup.)

Thackeray even parodies the conventions of the fairy tale itself. Prince Giglio's suit of fairy armor is "not only embroidered all over with jewels, and blinding to your eyes to look at" but also "water-proof, gun-proof, and sword-proof" (113), the equivalent in armor of a Timex watch. Faced with such splendor King Padella is "justly irritated." "'If, [says he to Giglio] you ride a fairy horse, and wear fairy armour, what on earth is the use of my hitting you? I may as well give myself up as a prisoner at once'" (115). Padella's attitude is logical, but hardly what one expects from the villain in a fairy story.

The most conspicuously "literary" touch is Thackeray's unavoidable narrator, so familiar to the readers of *Vanity Fair*.[4] "I hope you do not imagine that there was any impropriety in the Prince and Princess walking together in the palace garden and because Giglio kissed Angelica's hand in a polite manner" – the narrator interjects chattily above one illustration. "In the first place they are cousins, next, the Queen is walking in the garden too (you cannot see her for she happens to be behind that tree)" (28). Thackeray's narrator is constantly at the reader's elbow explaining, qualifying, moralizing, addressing himself first to the children ("I shouldn't like to sit in that stifling robe with such a thing as that on my head," he confides, beneath a picture of King Valoroso) and then to the adults in his audience ("Thus easily do we deceive ourselves! Thus do we fancy what we wish is right!" – in reference to Valoroso's attempts to justify stealing the Paflagonian crown from his nephew, Giglio). The narrator is very much a storyteller who, as C.N. Manlove has noted, "stands between [the reader] and the story" so that "the tale becomes an expression of a particular consciousness" (13). But the narrator's highly personal, even chummy, tone also forces the reader to respond "both to the narrator and to the characters; and this in turn animates the fiction" (Ferris, 35). If Thackeray's narrator puts some distance between the writer, (and the reader), and the work, he also draws the reader into the world he is creating and helps break down "the barrier between fiction and life" (ibid.).

To focus solely on the literary aspects of *The Rose and The Ring* would be unjust, for it has all the ingredients of a perfect fairy tale. There is the brave and handsome Giglio, who defeats his enemies, regains his kingdom and frees the beautiful Rosalba. There is Blackstick, the requisite fairy godmother, who rewards the good and turns evil-doers into a variety of inanimate objects. Of course there are the rose and the ring, magical gifts that bring both delight and disaster. And finally there is the happy ending with foes vanquished, lovers united, and rightful order restored.

But to suggest the *The Rose and The Ring* is simply a traditional fairy tale with a few literary special effects thrown in would do it an even greater injustice, for Thackeray's story is more complex. As Gordon Ray notes in his introduction to the MS facsimile edition of *The Rose and The Ring*, Thackeray's attitude towards the world of make-believe was "curiously ambivalent."[5] In *The Rose and The Ring*, his "two apparently irreconcilable attitudes, of insistence on reality and delight in romance, exist simul-

taneously." He "contrives to tell his wonderful story without suppressing his alert feeling for the actual. . . . Accepting the incredible *donnée* of the pantomime fable, he sets real human beings wandering about within it" (xv-xvi).

Thackeray's illustrations emphasize the absurd, the grotesque, the fantastic; however, his text portrays characters that are not exaggerated, two-dimensional "types" but sentient beings who arouse the reader's interest and sympathies. Prince Giglio's preferring hunting and carousing to classics and mathematics seems quite plausible, as does Bulbo's desperate stranglehold on the magic rose since without it he appears ugly and laughable. Even the villains have a human side. Valoroso quaffs copious quantities of cognac not because he enjoys it, but to help him forget that he has stolen the crown from his nephew. Padella sulks like an angry child when Giglio defeats him. And if Countess Gruffanuff deserves little pity when her scheme to trick Giglio into marrying her fails, she is humorously touching when she believes herself engaged to him.

> And when candles came, and she had helped to undress the Queen and Princess, she went into her own room, and actually practised, on a sheet of paper, "Griselda Paflagonia," "Barbara Regina," "Grizelda Barbara, Paf. Reg.," and I don't know what signatures besides, against the day when she should be Queen. . .(49).

Having created recognizably human characters Thackeray uses them to provide his readers with a moral lesson, one that is innocuous and sugar-coated enough to ignore if they like. After all, *The Rose and The Ring* was intended as holiday entertainment. But for Thackeray the world of fantasy has an established moral order and values that influence every aspect of the tale, and even the decidedly magical elements lend themselves to this moral structure. Fairy Blackstick cares for her godchildren's spiritual and emotional – rather than their material – welfare; she is troubled when the rose the ring make their owners lazy and ungrateful rather than happy. "'I know a number of funny things,'" she tells Giglio. "'I have seen some folk spoilt by good fortune, and others, as I hope, improved by hardship'" (86). The fairy's present of "a little misfortune" is calculated to develop the soundness of heart and mind which is her true gift. In the same way, although she recognizes Giglio as the rightful monarch Blackstick does not help him do away with his opponents until he has made himself fit to rule by catching up on his neglected education.[6] As in a traditional fairy tale, everyone gets what he or she deserves, but here they must first prove themselves deserving.

The rose and the ring are also very much a part of Thackeray's "web of moral concern" (Manlove, 11), although the rose is less important since Bulbo, and later Angelica, manage to limit its sphere of influence. But as the ring passes from hand to hand it serves as a sort of moral touchstone. With it, Angelica is conceited and insufferable. Gruffanuff is underhanded and conniving. Rosalba, humble and virtuous, finds its magic a curse rather than a blessing. The ring also becomes a moral yardstick for Giglio, who initially falls in love with Rosalba (as he did with Angelica) simply because she wears the ring. Only when he has learned and grown can he love Rosalba for herself. And only then can he understand that the illusion the ring provides is unnecessary where there is true love.

> "Rosalba needs no ring, I am sure," says Giglio, with a low bow. "She is beautiful enough, in my eyes, without any enchanted aid." . . .In *his* eyes she looked just as handsome as before! (TR&TR, 112)

The rose and the ring are left to Bulbo and Angelica, too ugly and too weak to accept each other as they really are and happy only with their illusions. The central problem resolved, the hero and heroine correctly having chosen reality over illusion, the story at an end, Blackstick is free to fly away never to be heard of again.

In writing about the transition from traditional to modern fantasy and Victorian fairy stories in particular, two critics who discuss *The Rose and The Ring* view it as a work of some significance. According to Stephen Prickett the story marks "an important change in Victorian sensibility" and a change in tone from earlier works. *The Rose and The Ring*, he suggests, rode the crest of a new wave in fantasy literature: "From the 1850s onwards fantasy is more self-conscious, more free, flexible, and reflexive, inviting the reader to accept, but to think about the nature of his acceptance" (72). C.N. Manlove characterizes *The Rose and The Ring* as a modern fairy tale, distinguished from a traditional tale by the presence of

> a consciousness which makes actions reasonable, moral, proportionate and comprehensible; which directly delights in its own creation; which engages in parody or imitation of other literary forms; which makes the reader aware of the personality of the author; which bestows significance on the story;. . .which uses irony; and which throws the reader on his own consciousness (14).

Both critics make points that are well worth considering. There is, however, one additional fact which must be taken into account. That is that much of what Thackeray puts into *The Rose and The Ring* – the allusions, the satire, the narrative technique, the humor, the moral structure – is simply what had been (and would prove) so effective in his other works. Thackeray the teller of fairy stories could not detach himself from Thackeray the novelist, who brought other literary influences to bear on the traditional fairy tale. And rather than proving a problem, this melding of tradition and innovation is certainly what accounts in large measure for the work's popular and critical success. ❁

(Endnotes continued on page 43)

difficult for children. Another reason may be that it is primarily an animal fantasy without the simplicity of, say, *The Wind in the Willows*, or the natural history adult appeal of real animals such as appear in, for example, Henry Williamson's nature books.

It may also be true to say that it is not much read because de la Mare has slipped into obscurity, having been dismissed by Modernist critics as an out-dated Georgian Romantic, and by Leavis and his school in particular as an "escapist" poet with nothing to say to our modern world. In respect of that "escapist" label, it is relevant to note Tolkien's protest in 1938, which might well stand as a defence of de la Mare:

> I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which "Escape" is now so often used: . . .In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical. . . .in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds (TL 53-4).

Tolkien recognizes that fantasy is important to man and is relevant to living and that it can be used to put "imaginatively starved modern man back once again into awed and reverent contact with a living universe."[16] De la Mare, too, finds that men are becoming estranged from their true place in nature and

> are often so thorned in with material worries, and immortal anxieties, and a stodgy heredity, and the deadly environment of too much money, or of the longing for more, or of the absence of any, that most of their joy and beauty must come at second hand and be translated for them out of experience by an eye that sees, an ear that hears. . . .[17]

Are not all writers of fantasy trying to effect such a translation as they entice their readers into their own "secondary" worlds of make-believe and magic?

A Song of Enchantment I sang me there,
In a green – green wood, by waters fair,
Just as the words came up to me
I sang it under the wild wood tree.
(CP 186) ❁

Endnotes

1 "A Forerunner of Tolkien? Walter de la Mare's *The Three Royal Monkeys*," *Mythlore* 28 (1981): 32-33.

2 See *Treasure Seekers and Borrowers: Children's Books in Britain 1900-1960* (London: The Library Association, 1962) 19.

3 Citations are from the Faber paper-covered edition of *The Three Royal Monkeys* (London: 1969); and from the 3rd ed. of *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin books, 1966), abbreviated hereafter to TRM and H respectively.

4 J.C. Nitzsche, "The King Under the Mountain: Tolkien's *Hobbit*," *North Dakota Quarterly* 47. 1 (1979): 5-18 (5).

5 See his essay "On Fairy-stories'" a lecture originally given at St. Andrews in 1938, and reprinted in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964) 36, 44, abbreviated hereafter to TL.

6 "Feodor Sologub," *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, 24 June 1915: 212; and *Introduction to Animal Stories chosen, arranged, and in some part rewritten by Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber, 1939) xxxiii.

7 "Hans Christian Andersen," *TLS* 1 Jan. 1914: 1-2.

8 See *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981) 212, No. 163, abbreviated hereafter to *Letters*.

9 "The Fairy-Tale Tradition," *Mallorn* 23 (1986): 30-36.

10 See Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1977) 164.

11 "The Exile," *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber, 1969) 201, abbreviated hereafter to CP.

12 "Creatures of Dream," *TLS* 14 Oct. 1955: 597-9 (597).

13 Quoted by Carpenter in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 222-23.

14 "A Book of Words," *TLS* 1 June, 1922: 350; and see A. Bentinck, "Walter de la Mare: A Study of His Poetry," Ph.D. thesis, U of Edinburgh, 1984. Chap. 2.

15 Russell Brain, *Tea with Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber, 1957) 20, 40.

16 Randel Helms, *Tolkien's World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974) 24.

17 "Afoot in England," *TLS* 1 July, 1909: 244.

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Endnotes

1 Gordon Ray points out the enormous popularity of Christmas pantomimes in Thackeray's day, noting that "the pantomime came to be divided into two distinct parts," an opening with material taken from "nursery tales, familiar dramas" or history, and a concluding Harliquinade employing stock characters from the Commedia dell' Arte (xiii). *The Rose and The Ring*, Ray suggests, "is in fact the 'speaking opening' of an early Victorian pantomime, infinitely refined and elaborated" (xv).

2 The "author" of *The Rose and The Ring* was M.A. (Michael Angelo) Titmarsh, a name under which Thackeray also authored other Christmas stories. Thackeray not only did the drawings for his fairy tale; he also had a hand in the woodcuts, although his skill with wood nowhere neared his talents with pencil and paints.

3 In a series of parodies originally written for *Punch* (1847-8) and later published as *Novels by Eminent Hands*, Thackeray satirizes the work of G.P.R. James in a short piece entitled "Barbazure."

4 Thackeray's narrator is considered rather forward even in an age when intrusive narrators were commonplace. As Ina Ferris has noted, "Thackeray's narrator is distinguished [from narrators employed by other Victorian authors such as Dickens, Trollope and Eliot] by his conversational, personal tone" (34).

5 Thackeray was, after all, the author whose usual literary "credo" was that "the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality" (Ray, Xii). But he also delighted in pantomimes containing "the sparkling sugar of benevolence, the plums of fancy, the sweetmeats of fun, the figs of – well, the figs of fairy fiction" all popped into "the seething cauldron of imagination" (Stevens, 8).

6 As C.N. Manlove has suggested, Blackstick's concern "is in contrast to traditional fairy tales, where the means by which the hero becomes a king and not in his fitness to govern" (11).

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